

A Bonding Experience
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“Heavens above,” the gentle, lilting voice of a young merchant’s daughter cracked ever so softly as she ogled the succulent selection of pastries laid out in the storefront window. “I’ve never seen cream puffs as large as these!” The exclamation caused the girl’s mother to pause in her tracks, the forty-something year old kept slightly off-balance as she carried a heavy load of goods for her shop.

Turning about on her heels, careful not to knock into the stone façade of the bakery and butcher’s shop, the money-minded mother chided, “Bea, you know that will go straight to your hips.”

The seemingly innocuous conversation was not nearly as private as the pair expected. With the door to the Tip and Tail wide open, in an attempt to help cool down the broiling hot bakery, the sweet butcher Lylia stood behind the till, rapping her fingers softly upon the countertop as she listened in on the back-and-forth prattling. “Yessssss,” she hissed softly under her breath, glancing about to make sure the inn-like public space was empty. By this time of day, most citizens of the City of New Tristram were still finishing up their work; whether they were living denizens or one of the multitude of resurrected undead under the thrall of their unassuming benefactor. “Come inside, dear,” Lylia crooned under her breath, huffing softly as she tried to will her victim in with hushed words alone. “You could use a little meat on those bones.”

“But Mom,” Bea grumbled, the future shop owner frowning as she pointed to the soft and fluffy pastries, the shoulder of her summer dress slipping just enough to reveal a beautiful tattoo peeking out along her upper arm. Dusted with powdered sugar and each dotted with a dollop of thickened cream to cover the hole used to fill them, they were practically otherworldly in their allure. It did not help that their dutiful baker happened to be among the dark cabal that kept New Tristram firmly in the hands of the forces of Hatred. “You can’t tell me they’re not mostly air! Besides, that one’s bigger than my fist, I’d have to eat it over a few days.”

“Pfft, it’s mostly sugar!” the mother retorted, rolling her eyes.

“Sugar does make a girl perfectly sweet,” Lylia rumbled, licking her chops as she craned her neck to get a better view of the young lady. Her long flaxen hair and soft features certainly made Lylia’s eyes widen with hunger, and lust. “My, my, what a beautiful golden glow,” Lylia huffed, trying not to raise her voice as she muttered under her breath. “I would adore butchering you, my dear. Though you’re so enamored with the pastries? Perhaps I could make a lovely girl wellington?” Lylia watched with intent as the mother and daughter held each other in a staring contest, gentle wisps of darkened, smokey tendrils curling around her calves and over her fingers as she narrated her desires. Unaware of her growing volume, Lylia’s ravenous hunger began to gnaw at her gut, desirous of the meat she could not have. “Slowly baked till there were no more struggles, just the gentle glow of the fire and anticipation of the first sli-”

“You were doing so well, Mom,” a familiar, perhaps even snarky, voice broke Lylia’s concentration. In a flash of rage, the butcher turned about to see Linarian standing behind her. The brash, extravagant young noblewoman must have gotten in through a back door or something; the agent of balance seemed amused, having waited silently for the right moment to make her presence known. As Lylia whipped about on her heels, her rage morphed into embarrassment as she felt Linarian held a finger up to her mouth. The cocky young lady in pink hoped to shush her mother before she could roar in anger. Once she was sure that the bickering pair outside the Tip and Tail were not aware of their

eavesdropping, Linarian spoke at last in a hushed whisper, "Didn't I tell you, I'd prefer not to ruin your cover?"

Lylia grumbled softly as she tried to restrain herself. Staring down at her smoking hands, the butcher became keenly aware that her human façade was slipping and that she was very, VERY close to dropping the illusion. This, of course, would not have been ideal; the Daughter of Hatred, Lady Lilith, did everything she could to keep her identity hidden from the human populace of New Tristram. They could never know that the most dangerous demoness in all of Sanctuary was posing as a humble butcher in their midst. Taking a deep breath to steady herself, and ensure her illusory human guise was stable, Lilith hushed out a frustrated, "What do you want?"

"Just checking in on things," Linarian said with a smile, holding up her finger a bit longer until she was sure the townsfolk outside had left. Despite Bea's sadness at losing out on a beautiful cream puff, it was better that they not interrupt the family reunion. "I will say, you've kept to your word. This place is practically empty of human flesh."

Her face twisted in frustration, Lilith cast her gaze towards the butcher's side of the shop, the cases of steaks and chops looking slightly different from even a week prior. While there were a few scraps of indistinct and heavily discounted 'stew meat,' most of the cuts were clearly animal in nature. "I didn't want to... break that promise," she muttered, the succubus feeling her stomach growl with an ache she could not possibly explain. This was not mere method acting, playing the part of a butcher. As her own flesh caused a corrupting, gnawing hunger, it seemed that Lilith grew a deep need for human flesh over the months. And now that it was absent, it was getting hard to control that hunger.

"I would never fault you for what you've done, Mom," the noblewoman said with a smile. Pushing herself off the doorjamb, Linarian stepped closer to her mother, her flowing golden hair bouncing at its curled tips. "That's why I returned."

"I don't need checking up on," Lilith frowned, only to have her reaction waved off softly.

"No, no, no, Mom, you're the Daughter of Hatred. I trust you to make your own decisions." Chuckling, she added, "I don't want to be your secretary, making sure you've done the right amount of good every day." The comment might have been a bit snide, but it also softened up Lilith's frustrated features, the succubus letting her guard fall ever so softly as they spoke. "No, I came here because I wanted to suggest a little fun together."

"Fun?" Lilith asked, cocking an eyebrow at the suggestion.

"A little... mother-daughter bonding experience?" Linarian's usually cheerful smile turned vicious as she added, "I want to take you on a hunting trip with me. I've been keeping tabs on a lovely little spot up in the mountains where the wild game is very choice this time of year." The oblique comment seemed to cause even more confusion for Lilith, forcing Linarian to sigh as she added, "Look, I promise you won't regret it. C'mon, let me show you. Have a carriage brought around and make sure you're feeling up to some spellcasting, Mom."

A thundering tromp rushed through the overgrown forest, underscored by the sound of a beastly creature snapping branches and crushing shrubbery. These constant noises were punctuated by an echoing bark, tainted with a guttural, otherworldly rumble as the slaving beast forced its way through the forest. For what seemed like an eternity, the creature bounded headlong, harrying some unseen and mostly silent prey. Mostly, save for her heavy breathing as she struggled to keep ahead of her pursuer.

The young traveler gasped and heaved as she burst through the undergrowth at the forest's edge, terrified at the realization that she stepped out into a clearing. Behind her, rising smoke billowed from the caravan she abandoned, the gentle hue of amber and orange lighting up the underside of the thick clouds that rose from what was once her carriage. She was quick on her feet, the pilgrim barely managing to flee into the forest just as the demons attacked. She hoped to lose them in the dense foliage; as distracted as they were slaughtering and looting, only one of their fiendish hell hounds took chase. Any hope of losing the slaving beast was lost as she realized the open meadow was far too big to traverse. And the sound of twigs snapping on the edge of the clearing signaled to the frightened wanderer that her time was up.

Snorting out its pug-faced snout, a demonic hound crumpled the scant bushes out of the way as it pushed through the forest edge. A low rumble growled in the beast's chest as it stomped forwards, the scaly, grotesque creature sniffing the air before locking eyes on the lone survivor of the attack. Its massive form, easily chest-height on the terrified traveler began to stalk forwards in a slow, methodical manner, knowing full well it could overtake her on the flat meadows. That she stood her ground, frightened as she was, meant the unfortunate victim knew that too.

"Back!" she demanded, growling as she put up her fists in a feeble attempt to defend herself. "Stay back! T- The light compels you!" She snarled at the circling predator, hoping that the call upon the high heavens might do something, anything to stop the terrible hell hound. The creature seemed unamused, its slow circumambulation as it stalked its prey occasionally broken up by feinting moves, the animalistic beast probing at the clearly outmatched young traveler. It did not take long for the hell hound to make its choice, lunging in with a snap of its jaws and a guttural howl that shook the very ground it trod upon.

A flash of light cracked across the sky, emanating from the meadow below as the hell hound was sent sailing. It landed on its side, disoriented and scorched as the bright light faded. In the traveler's place stood a tall, hooded figure, her robe-clad body standing proud and erect as she stared down the foolish demon. Two crystalline wings unfurled behind her, made up of broad, shimmering gems that seemed to trap the mid-day light in a glistening, prismatic array. As the hell hound stood once more, baring its teeth from its pug-nosed face, the traveler spoke once more, this time with a booming baritone voice, "By Anu's grace, I command you to slink off to whatever foul hole you festered from." Spreading her wings, the no-longer disguised angel tried her hand at intimidating the weaker lesser demon.

But for some reason, the dogged hellspawn stood its ground, the beast letting out some guttural howl before lunging forwards towards the angelic traveler in a mad fury. Slaving and slobbering, the hell hound bared its fangs, jaws open wide just as the pair connected. The strike was easily parried by the angel, her quick reaction allowing her to both grip and flip the hulking demon before using its momentum against it, sending the devilspawn pup flying straight into an old oak tree. However,

something peculiar caught the angel's eye. When the demon fell back to earth, it landed hard against a hunter's snare. The rope snapped, catching the beast's hind leg before suddenly sending the hefty hellhound streaking back up into the air. After a few hilarious bounces, the confused and dizzied beast found itself staring at the ground, unable to move as the noose held it tight by the ankle. Little did the angel know, the distraction was quite intentional.

Before the angel realized anything was amiss, she found herself standing amidst a forest of black tendrils slithering up from the meadow ground. Inky and dark, oozing a purple hue, the tentacled digits seemed to sprout and grow from the ground itself, worming their way underneath her armor. The demonic magic crawled over her body, finding whatever spot had yet to be restrained and wrapping tight around the offending area. Despite the angel's normally stoic nature, the invasion of slippery tendrils wandering up her thighs and snaking up her body caused her to panic. Flashes of hot light splattered wildly from her hands, the angel casting magic wildly in a vain attempt to cleanse the inky tendrils of demonic evil that coiled up her body.

As the winding tentacles of demonic energy tightened its grip, finally pinning the angel's arms at her sides, the traveler felt a cold chill run down her spine as if something truly evil had stepped into the meadow. With a low, sultry growl, a terrible horned figure emerged from the forest, eyes aflame with pride and hunger at her work. There was no mistaking the Daughter of Hatred, her scaly black horns and hooved legs seemed to meld beautifully with the silky, ivory-white flesh of her arms and upper body. The succubus took her time approaching, savoring every second of the lowly angel's captivity. Sashaying her hips with sultry abandon, Lady Lilith dismissed the wispy black smoke that surrounded her cloven feet as she stepped up to her prize.

"Well, well," Lady Lilith hissed, the Daughter of Hatred rumbling with haughty pride as she reached her claw-tipped fingers out to trace the angel's supple form. "And what might your name be, sweetheart?" Threading her fingers under the angel's hood, she tried to coax back the traditional cowl all agents of the High Heavens wore, only to feel a sharp pain. Withdrawing her hand, Lilith growled as she realized the angel bit her in a bold act of defiance. Yet her cocky behavior also knocked loose the headwrap she wore, allowing the angel's golden locks to fall to either side of her head.

"Go to hell, spawn of Mephisto," she spat, only to gag as she felt Lilith grip her tight about the throat in retaliation.

Rearing her arm back, and allowing a gout of flame to erupt from her palm, Lilith roared, "You impudent whore!" But before she could bring her arm down, hoping to blast the angelic figure with her aethereal flame, Lilith felt her wrist jerk backwards in a firm yank.

"Hang on, hang on!" Linarian grumbled as she held back Lilith's rage. "We don't want to kill this one too quickly. After all, this is supposed to be a hunting trip. We should be enjoying ourselves." With a smirk, the noblewoman in her pristine pink dress (kept magically cleaned despite having tromped through the woods for much of the day) hiked a thumb over her shoulder towards the pug-nosed hell hound. "I want you to do something for me first."

"Do something for you?" Lilith repeated, releasing her grip upon the angel's throat as she turned to address the hanging hell hound. The beast was no closer to freeing itself from the hanging snare trap that Linarian had set out a few hours earlier. However, it had calmed down considerably, the struggle to

break out exhausting its body to the point it could only sway helplessly in the breeze. "You want me to kill it first?" she asked at length, the Daughter of Hatred finding it odd that her own daughter would ask her to dismiss one of the burning hells' creations.

"All things in balance, Mom," Linarian said with a smile as she drew a dagger from her hip. "We're here to hunt those who intercede in the human realm. That means angels and demons alike must be treated as invaders on this land." Handing the dagger to her mother, Linarian could see the explanation seemed to click with Lady Lilith as she contemplated what her daughter was actually saying.

"I think I understand," she said at length, a low rumble in her chest as she stepped towards the hell hound, cautious not to get too close to its slavering jaws. "You intend to help the humans live undisturbed by the Eternal Conflict."

"Angels and demons are but two sides of the same coin, they do not belong in Sanctuary. And the presence of one only draws the other. Therefore-" Linarian added, only to be cut off as she watched Lilith lunge forwards towards the beastly brute. Plunging the knife deep into the hell hound's neck, the creature squealed, its last struggles causing the demonic canine to thrash and twist in the snare as gooey, darkened blood pulsed out in thick rivulets. Unconcerned by the beast's movements, Lilith raked the blade across the canine's neck, shushing it softly as one might try to comfort a pet, until the creature finally hung limp and quiet from its leg.

"You want me to kill both?" Lilith asked at last, turning about to face Linarian and the captured angel. "Purge both angel and demon alike?" Even with this strange turn of events, the rush of the successful hunt left Lady Lilith beyond pleased with herself; a deep and wicked grin was plastered across her bloodstained and viscera-splattered face.

"All things in balance," Linarian repeated as she watched the expression on her mother's eyes light up at her realization that she did not need to give up killing, torturing, and murdering. She simply had to change her targets.

Lilith and Linarian spent almost a week in the mountains, the pair running roughshod over the countryside as they indulged in the most cruel and base instincts that Lilith craved. She hardly seemed to notice her longing and hunger for human flesh ebbed away as the pair camped out under the stars, chowing down on the flesh of angels and demons alike. Lilith even had the opportunity to show Linarian a thing or two about cooking delicate angelic flesh, and how best to season the far less palatable demonic meat.

It was only on the last day of their trek that Linarian revealed her ulterior motives for decimating the warring factions in this sleepy little countryside. As they hiked their way back towards New Tristram, packs laden with pelts and primal cuts of all sorts of flesh, Linarian pointed out a slow-moving procession off in the distance.

"Look, over there," she pointed, before motioning for the Daughter of Hatred to get down behind the tree line, her succubus form quite easier to spot even from afar. "You see that?"

“Looks like... A group of humans?” Lilith asked, shielding her eyes from the sun as she squinted off into the distance.

“Pfft, I mean, you’re not wrong. But also, that is the yearly mining detail from the City of Entsteig. The city depends upon the coal mines in the mountainside, not just for their basic survival, but also to maintain their signal fires so they may keep back the hordes from the Dreadlands to the North.” As she spoke, Lady Lilith began to notice the bedraggled laborers trudging up the mountain path. They appeared to be unarmed, save for a few town guardsmen and whatever picks or shovels they had at hand. “Incursions by demons from the Dreadlands brought a reaction from the High Heavens. The whole mountainside became a battle ground a few years ago, and the people of Entsteig could no longer help themselves to the supply of coal.”

“So, by us wiping out the angels and demons,” Lilith put the pieces together aloud, “The people of Entsteig can defend themselves again?”

“Exactly,” Linarian said with a smile, motioning for Lilith to follow her down the mountainside again, taking a more roundabout path to ensure that the pair remained unseen by the work detail. “Without the battles raging, they can rebuild. And the natural order of Sanctuary will be restored.”

“Everything in balance,” Lilith added with a smirk as the pair made their way back to the City of New Tristram. Lilith could not help but feel refreshed after the trip; despite all the hard work, the hunt was rather relaxing. Not to mention it was eye-opening to see how a few simple actions could allow the humans to grow and thrive without the heavy weight of war upon them. Perhaps, just perhaps, Lilith could see herself taking on a guiding role in humanity’s growth. And perhaps she could work with her daughter to make Sanctuary just a bit better for the humans.

But as they were unloading their haul from the hunting trip, Linarian did not seem herself. At first, Lilith just assumed her daughter was just distracted, as if something had suddenly come to her mind. But they had not been home even long enough to say hello to Lady Lucia. What sort of distractions could possibly come to mind so quickly that they left the outgoing and talkative Linarian so distant?

“Hun,” Lilith said as she laid a heavy rolled pelt down upon the countertop, trying to keep the concern off her face, “I just wanted to say that I...” Pausing to collect her thoughts, she decided to dig around in her rucksack, retrieving two thick tenderloins harvested from the cocky young angel. The illusory magic that held up the façade of New Tristram had given them just the right sheen to appear animal in origin. “I wanted to say, thank you.” The words seemed foreign coming from Lady Lilith’s mouth, the Daughter of Hatred not one to humble herself in front of others. “I had a lot of fun this week.”

“Oh, I’m-” Linarian hesitated, removing her hand from her temple, before replacing it again to brush some of her flowing golden hair out of the way. She tried to play off her distraction, but it was no use. “I’m glad, Mom. I was, honestly I was really hoping you would enjoy seeing things different for a change.”

“I- You know I can be stubborn sometimes,” Lilith swallowed, admitting her own faults aloud. “It runs in the family. A- Are you alright?” Lilith asked, as she watched Linarian blink a few times in

confusion, the young noblewoman shaking her head back and forth as she looked about the room in a daze.

"I'm fine," Linarian said, pausing to take a breath in and out. Settling herself, the noblewoman sighed softly as she added, "I just... I can sense there's something wrong with the balance of nature."

"Something wrong? You mean you can sense—" Lilith began before Linarian cut her off.

"Yes, my agents are not just my eyes and ears. They act like a web of magical sensors." Linarian sighed as she walked about to a basin in the back so she could draw herself a glass of water. "When something is off in the balance of nature, I can sense it through this web." Sighing softly, Linarian, pursed her mouth before admitting, "Something very peculiar struck me just now. I- I think I'm going to need a quill and ink. Some paper and one of the City's fastest messengers." Her cadence seemed to speed up as she made each demand, finally causing Lilith to grip her daughter by the shoulder. "I need to get word to my followers."

"Slow down, slow down, hun," the Daughter of Hatred hushed, coaxing Linarian to sit down behind the butcher shop counter. "You need to tell me what's going on."

"I- It's nothing. Business amongst my contacts."

"That's the biggest lie I've ever heard," Lilith pushed the issue, her eyes mellowing, showing legitimate concern. "Darling, you look positively pained. Please let me help you."

"I know you're worried but..." Linarian trailed off before shaking her head at her mother's insistence. "No offense, but... Listen, Mom, when the balance of nature needs adjusting, it's not always as simple as killing off a bunch of angels and demons. Sometimes I need to perform noble deeds to correct the evil in the world. Sometimes I need to be heinous to overbalance against some incursion from the High Heavens. This appears to be a righteous mission. I couldn't ask you to try and take it."

"Well, you certainly are in no place to take it yourself," Lilith replied, narrowing her eyes as she rubbed her hand softly on Linarian's head, as if she was feeling for a fever. "How much time do you have to work on this..." Thinking for a moment, Lilith decided to describe it as a, "problem?"

"I- I don't know. But this danger feels calamitous. Like something terrible could be unleashed if I don't act fast." Turning her gaze to lock eyes with her mother, Linarian relented at last. "Maybe... Maybe it would be best if you went?"

"Me? Do something good for a change?" Lilith looked a little taken aback at the suggestion. "I know you want to help redeem me, but I can't imagine how Sanctuary would react to seeing the Daughter of Mephisto rescuing kittens or something."

"Mom, this is serious," Linarian growled. "I'm trying to concentrate to find the source of the calamity. And as I narrow in, it feels like there's less time to act. The disturbance continues to swell and grow." After pausing to think on it, Linarian added, "No, there really is no time. I'm sorry, Mom. I need your help. As a huge favor."

"You can't be serious?" Lilith frowned but did not push back as Linarian waved her hand over the countertop. The wooden butcher's block sparkled as she used her powers to form a rough illusory

map of Sanctuary. "Here, in the Fractured Peaks to the north. I can feel an innocent life is in danger. A very important innocent life."

"Only one life? How innocent could they possibly be?" Her frown grew more pronounced as she added, "You can't even tell me which mountain peak they're at?"

"There's no time, Mom." Linarian said with growing haste, bringing Lilith's nervous concern to an abrupt end and melting away her resistance. "I suspect that whatever is causing the disturbance is so overwhelming that even you will feel it when you draw near. I promise, it won't kill you to do something good in your life. And we'll come up with something devilish to do together later. Help you feel better about all that kitten rescuing," Linarian added, trying to force a smile to her face. "There will be opportunities. This event will likely cause so many ripples to the natural order."

"Fine," Lilith said at length, sighing softly as she reached out to coax her daughter off the stool. "I'll do it." Helping Linarian out from behind the butcher's counter, she aided her younger daughter up the old oaken staircase to get her some rest in one of the bedrooms upstairs. "But don't expect to lean on my abilities as if I were a carriage service," Lilith added, her usual scowling demeanor melting away to an uncharacteristically motherly tone. She could feel it, that connection she had lost with her daughter so many years past, beginning once again to strengthen. The bonds they shared were finally beginning to heal.

Whipping wind howled over the powdery, snow-swept mountainside, packing thick globules of icy crystals against any surface they hit. She had only been out in the exposed elements for an hour, but the frigid temperatures were enough for the Daughter of Hatred to begin to curse her own immortality. Miserable was an understatement; the proud demoness was forced to stop every fifth step to wipe away the matted buildup of slushy snow that caked her face and chilled straight through the heavy coat she wore. Lilith could not imagine how any human could live in this blasted wilderness. She even gave it a try herself, arriving through a one-way portal cloaked in her Lylia guise. Unfortunately, she was also forced to abandon it in favor of her usual succubus form, the wild weather breaking the concentration needed to keep up the spell.

Despite the slow and plodding nature of her journey, Lilith was thankful that Linarian was right. When she stopped and focused her mind, she could feel a strange bouy of negative, terrible energy emanating from just up the mountain's slope. And so, she walked, her cloven hooves trudging through knee-high snow while trying to brace against the cold onslaught of the winter wind.

As the mountain pass narrowed, Lilith sensed a certain unease about the place. It took a lot to unnerve a succubus, especially the Daughter of Hatred, but something just seemed wrong. The closer she got, the more she could sense the creeping dread without the need to concentrate. Passing by a stout oak, Lilith paused to wipe down her face once more, using the gnarled old tree as cover from the howling wind. But as she stood underneath its broad branches, Lilith caught ear of a strange 'thunk-thunk bump' noise every time the breeze lightened up. Gazing skyward, she was perplexed at the sight of a heavy log strung up upon a bent and bowed limb. The thick trunk was caked with snow, it's massive size causing it to occasionally swing in the wild wind. *Peculiar*, she thought, only to realize that the log

was simply a weight, used to actuate a cord that was strung across the path. Following the icicle-strewn rope, Lilith's eyes widened as she saw what lay upon the other end.

A human man stood frozen upright in the deep snow, his body pierced through by a dozen sharpened stakes fastened on a wooden board. The Daughter of Hatred had completely missed him; the whole tripwire setup, victim included, was practically invisible in the snow drifts, save for the edge that lay downwind of the storm. Someone had laid this trap and caught themselves a weary traveler just before the weather turned.

"What foul place is this?" Lilith asked to nobody in particular, holding up a hand to the wind as she gave the body a closer look. Peering up the mountain pass, she could see what looked like a stone structure built along the cliff's edge, even despite the low visibility. The one-bedroom hovel gave her a headache to even look at. "Is this it?" she added, regretting opening her mouth as she tasted another blast of cold, snowy frost.

Another ten minutes of trudging led Lilith to the stone doorway, the succubus forced to dig with her hands through the snow to unearth the simple door. The thought briefly passed her mind that if only Mephisto could see her now: stumbling through a storm to save some innocent human. But the thought was banished quickly as she knew that she had to do this. For Linarian. With one swift kick, Lilith burst open the doorway, coming face to face with a charnel house of horrors.

A slew of bodies lay upon the floor of the simple mountainside shack. Piles of bones filled the rear corners of the simple room, flanking the foot and head of a small two-person bed. The middle of the room contained a meager straw mat, upon which a young, brown-haired lady in modest sack-cloth dress lay face down. Embers in the tiny hearth hissed and sputtered every time the wind whipped over the chimney. Someone had tried their best to kindle a fire, despite the temperature inside the hovel being dangerously low. It certainly was not the other two occupants of the house; two fresh corpses lay strewn on either side of the young lady. A motherly woman in her early forties sat slumped against the right wall of the home, her entrails dragged out from her body in gory handfuls. At some point, the assailant had wrapped her colon about her neck, slowly strangling her to death. On the left of the home, closest to the hearth, a man who could not have been much older had endured the horrors of the bloody eagle, his lungs ripped out of his chest cavity from underneath his rib cage. Lilith could not help but note the frost on the tips of his purpled lungs, his blood pooling in crystalline puddles. The pair had obviously been killed just before the storm, their fresh deaths still marring the tiny, one-room house.

"What happened here?" Lilith asked, swallowing as she tried to make sense of it all. Her breath fogged the air before her face as she approached the young lady on the ground. On first glance, the young maiden did not look bloodied. In fact, she appeared to be the only one unscathed from the carnage, but she couldn't know for sure without checking. Despite her icy, demonic touch, Lilith must have still felt warmer than the bone-chilled wind; a silky soft hand shot out before Lilith could react, gripping the succubus's arm with a terrible ferocity.

For a brief moment their eyes met, the young lady's soft auburn hair tufted about either side of her rounded face, framing the distant gaze in her eyes. As Lilith jerked backwards, both out of surprise and in fear of having scared the girl, she felt the fallen maiden dig her nails in. Thin red lines etched into Lilith's forearm, leaving behind tiny scratches. As Lilith recovered from the scare, she watched the girl nestle her hand, warmed by the brief touch, next to her face, as if trying to capture that tiny ounce of

heat. Her humble peasant's clothes did little to protect her from the elements, but yet she was alive. And the Daughter of Hatred knew that rescuing her would be a true act of mercy.

Mercy. It was a lovely name for a lovely young lady. Especially one whose life had been so terribly uprooted. Back home in the comfort of New Tristram and nursed back to health by the twins' dotting care, the auburn-haired girl was finally able to explain her terrible ordeal. Her family was attacked by brigands. Her father managed to fend off a few with traps and his rusty old dagger, but it was not enough. The young lass tried to run to the forest to escape the carnage, but the approaching blizzard drove her back to the house where she found them all dead.

Linarian was the only member of the family who was confused. While it was clearly a noble act to save this young lady from death, she could not figure out how one lonely shepherd's daughter could be so earth-shattering to the balance of power. As Mercy regained her strength, Linarian, Lilith and Lucia agreed that they would keep her in New Tristram a while longer. This was both so that she could recover from the traumas of what she saw, and so that Linarian could study her further and figure out what might have caused such a terrible fluctuation in the balance of nature.

And so, Mercy would come to live at the Tip and Tail. The surreal arrangement was not lost on Lady Lilith. Mere months prior she might have joked that the cabin was 'her kind of place' and that it 'even came with a free meal.' But now, the Daughter of Hatred, the succubus who rose from the depths to challenge the mighty Western Kingdoms, found herself acting more like a mentor to Mercy. Much as she was trying to mend her relationship with Linarian.

Put to work at the Tip and Tail, Mercy would learn the ways of baking and butchery, the sweet young lady quickly becoming a regular saleswoman when hungry passersby stopped in to see the menu. There was something about that glint in her eye, like thrown daggers sailing through the air. When she locked onto you, you were bound to do exactly as she said. Lilith and Lucia took well to their enigmatic apprentice. It almost seemed like Linarian's scheme was working. Like watching a row of dominos fall, Linarian knew that she could effect mighty change upon the Daughter of Hatred, with only the slightest push. That is until that fateful day.

A flurry of banging and shouts awoke Lady Lilith from her slumber in the early morning hours. Stumbling from her room, joined upstairs by her twin sister and Mercy from their own quarters, the three raced downstairs, expecting to see the Tip and Tail being looted or pillaged from the sounds they heard. But instead, they stood face to face with Lilith's daughter, her normally cheerful smirk replaced with a cold and fallen scowl. Her dainty hands, so often kept magically cleaned to preserve her pristine image as an upright and upstanding member of the nobility, were caked with blood and fluids, a thick, red meat steak squeezed between her fingers as she held it aloft for the twins to see.

"I need an explanation. Now," Linarian growled, her usual tone almost hollow as she made the demand.

"Wha- What do you...?" Lilith asked, eyes flitting back and forth across the butcher's shop in confusion. In her burst of anger, Linarian tore through several of the meat cases, yanking out fistfuls of

raw and cool flesh before throwing them on the ground into a bloody pile. “What in the Burning Hells are you doing?!”

“All this time, Mom?” Linarian hissed through her clenched teeth. “You were just playing along, weren’t you?” Rearing her leg back, Linarian kicked one of the thick roasts that lay upon the floor. Three and a half pounds of meat bounced a few feet on the wooden floor, coming to rest skin-side up at Lilith’s cloven hooved feet. Lilith’s eyes widened as she realized the pale skin, reminiscent to pork belly, sported a beautiful tattoo of a butterfly nestled upon a rose. To ink such a tattoo by hand was not an easy feat, even in the Western Kingdoms. You would have to be very cosmopolitan, or wealthy to get such work done... Perhaps even... A merchant?

The thought flashed before her eyes as Lilith remembered the young merchant’s daughter. The one from just a few months ago who was happily eyeing up the pastries in the shop window. At once the breath left Lilith’s chest as she struggled to make sense of it. After what seemed like an eternity wrestling her thoughts together, the Daughter of Hatred managed to stammer out, “I... I... I swear-”

“Why should I take your word, Mom. There’s a meat case filled with flesh right here?!” Linarian roared, banging her fist upon the wooden counter. There was no telling if the meat came from just one human, but it was likely that most cuts in the shelf were those of the young lady.

“Linarian, dear,” Lucia interjected, the noblewoman’s sweet aunt trying to take the pressure off her sister. “We closed up shop last night with those cases empty.”

“And we were asleep when you got here!” Lilith added, her face scrunched in a soft scowl.

“Then where did the human meat come from?” Linarian demanded coldly.

“I- I don’t,” Lilith found herself stammering, trying to find a solution. “I don’t have an answer,” she said at last, before quickly adding, “but we can get to the bottom of it! A- And a proper funeral, at the cathedral.” It was only then that Linarian began to back down. Her mother, at least the wicked and cruel Daughter of Hatred that she knew, would never suggest such pity upon a victim she truly intended to murder. Not to mention, she’d be incredulous at the thought of wasting so much meat. “With the full honors of the Zakarum Church!” she added, Lilith’s face twisting in a grimace. Now Linarian knew that Lilith was trying to placate her, but still, it was the thought that counted.

“Alright,” Linarian huffed at last, casting her gaze down at the mess of girlmeat heaped upon the floor. “I’m going to take your word for it, Mom,” she added, sighing as she turned her gaze towards Lucia. “Auntie, you’re the one who deals in illusion magicks, would you mind taking a walk with me around the property? Maybe we can discern something about...” For a brief moment, Linarian’s eyes caught Mercy’s, her gentle features framed by the soft, auburn curls of her hair. “Whoever did this,” she said before trailing off. Instead of vocalizing the thought that came to mind, Linarian sighed as she looked down at her blood speckled clothing, allowing one final comment to leave her lips. “Ugh.”

Lady Lilith watched as Linarian led her twin sister out the front door, a flash of brilliant green light as she covered her clothing in an illusory charm spell. Even so early in the morning, Linarian had to look her best. Heaving a sigh of relief, the succubus turned her attention to Mercy. Halfway through motioning towards the floor, her mouth agape as she prepared to speak. But before she could utter a word, the succubus caught that darkened glint in Mercy’s eyes. The young lady had her head turned, a

crass smirk plastered on her face as she watched Linarian and Lucia leave to do some investigation. There was something off about the way she held herself. Something wrong. The young lady was certainly crafty, but Lilith only now caught sight of the cruelty welled within her eyes. The lust. The... hatred.

Without missing a beat, Lilith calmly finished her motion. "Mercy, dear. Fetch me a wrap of linen from the tailors. This poor soul..." Looking about, she added, "Or souls? ...deserve a sanctified burial."

Lady Lilith was not accustomed to being an investigator. Perhaps that was why the Chop Shop got the jump on her so many long months ago? Even in her seat of power, cloaked in wispy, chaotic magic and the darkness of a moonless night, Lilith still felt as if she could always sense a set of eyes upon her. It did not help that as she approached the ramshackle old building off to the farthest edge of town, she began to feel the same, terrible chaotic pulse she felt back on the mountaintop.

Surrounded by overgrown weeds and eaten up by thick vines that gnarled through drafty stonework, the decrepit, crumbling building seemed to emanate with a sense of untold dread and terror the closer Lilith stepped. It was strange to think that somehow, deep within the realm of power she had carved out inside of her kingdom, a force utterly foreign and destructive could not only exist, but also establish itself right under her nose. Pausing at the doorway, Lilith wondered if perhaps she should call the town guard. Or at least call Lucia and Linarian for their help. But as her claw-tipped fingers caressed the door, she could feel a strange pull slowly tugging on her. A corrupt, devilish echo that almost taunted her to step inside. It was pointless to resist; in the blink of an eye Lilith was standing inside the ramshackle hovel, staring down at the entryway to the old root cellar below the building.

A muffled groaning, whimpering noise seemed to come from below, growing louder with each step down the compacted dirt staircase. Descending into pitch darkness, Lilith had to squint to see the bottom few steps. Frustrated at the lack of lighting, the Daughter of Hatred ignited a flash of purple flame from her palm, only to see the root cellar illuminated in an ominous darklight. At the same instant, several smoldering torches caught aflame, revealing a gruesome sight. Bones lay scattered everywhere across the tiny room, save for a terrible contraption built into the old wooden support beam that served to sure up the ancient shack from below. A wooden stool was nailed into the support beam, the floor underneath strewn with piles of wood, slick with a sheen of some strong-smelling oil or camphor. Upon that stool sat a terrified woman, her body bound tight to the wooden post with heavy iron chains. Her auburn brown hair was cut short with haphazard knife strokes, revealing a tight metal collar surrounding her slender neck, studded into the heavy support beam with thick iron spikes. Yet Lilith was keenly aware that she, and the gagged victim, were not alone in the tiny crawlspace. She watched as two supple hands curled around the captive girl's neck, her mewling whimpers half-choked on what appeared to be her frilly panties stuffed deep in her mouth. The familiar fingers carefully laced a thick hempen rope around it as if she were trying to adorn her slender frame with a beautiful necklace.

"I was curious when you'd find my little hideaway," a familiar voice crooned, the cutting edge of Mercy's voice filling Lilith's ears.

“Nice place,” Lilith commented coldly, her cloven hooved foot idly kicking aside a bleached rib bone, presumably from what remained of Bea’s corpse. “Curious how easily you tricked me, and my daughter.”

“You were the one expecting me to be a damsel in distress,” Mercy replied coldly. “Never once thought you’d rescue a murderer.” Mercy slowly teased her fingertips around the terrified young lady’s throat. The woman’s muffled moans turned to terrified screams as she felt Mercy step down from behind her, twisting the hempen rope in her hand till it cut off her breathing in a simple yet effective garrote.

“How about you explain yourself,” Lilith growled, the pounding ache in her head returning as she watched the sweet young lady begin to choke her captive victim.

Tugging on the rope in gentle, bouncing motions, Mercy seemed quite pleased toying with the kidnapped lady’s head, forcing it to bounce backwards into the wooden post. Any time she let up pressure, the terrified girl thrust her head forwards, bruising her windpipe on the metal collar. “I was born with morbid lust. A sweet and unassuming girl in a mountainside religious commune. Obedience, kindness, those teachings were not for me. I lusted to feel the power over life and death. At first it was killing animals. Then it was killing people, setting traps in the forest for passersby.”

“That explains that,” Lilith muttered to herself, before turning her gaze to the tortured girl. She could recognize the kidnapped woman as one of the latest arrivals to the City of New Tristram. At least Mercy had learned from her mistake; this time she did not attack an established member of society. “So, you were a snotty little brat. There’s probably a dozen like you in the arms of those crazy Skatsim cults.” Lilith could see Mercy’s eyes narrow at the slight, her fist tightening around the garrote in anger. “What made you special?”

“I ran away. Created my own little hell home off in the wilderness. It was nice, killing as I saw fit, collecting trophies from my vanquished.” Mercy finally let go from the cord wound taught around the captive young lady’s throat. Already blue in the face, she screamed into her gag, nostrils flaring as her eyes blinked through the lightheadedness. All the while, Mercy continued to speak. “And in the cold of the frigid mountains, I found myself drinking deep from the company I allowed to survive. Sinners, rapists, murderers.” The litany of cruel and terrible people made Lilith raise an eyebrow. “Their presence as my guests, paid for with their corrupting stories and lusts, stained my curious soul black as night.”

Lilith could not help but wonder if the cruel and twisted girl was merely acting the part of a deranged maniac, or if she could truly feel the pulse of evil, chaotic energy that welled about her body. Mercy’s descriptions came with wild-eyed fervor as she stepped around the root cellar’s central support, having to duck her head to avoid clipping a beam before coming to rest kneeling before the Daughter of Hatred’s cloven feet. “You know my daughter, Linarian, will have many things to say about you,” Lilith said at long last. Yet she could also feel a strange sensation welling in her gut. Taking a deep breath to calm herself, she added, “You know that I-”

“I know exactly who you are, oh Lady Lilith. You... You’ve grown weak. Soft.” The words slipped from Mercy’s tongue as she flipped back her curly brown hair. Staring up into Lilith’s eyes she spat, “Pathetic, listening to that Nephilem daughter of yours.”

“Listen, you impudent-” Lilith spat, her fingertips erupting in goutts of flame.

“Yesss,” Mercy hissed. “You feel it don’t you? That thump in your heart, that ache in your soul?” Mercy’s grin turned wicked as she pointed back towards the captive young lady. It was then that Lilith noticed it, a set of runes of chalk and salt laid out about the central support beam, its angular shape reminiscent of the Triune. In her haste to rescue Mercy in the deadly cold, she almost completely ignored a series of scratch marks on the floor boards in that old decrepit mountain shack.

“Y- You you’re not just some murderous foundling?” Lilith asked aloud, swallowing as she realized that the pounding dread in her head was not some ‘anomaly in the balance of nature.’ It was a beacon, one that drew her straight to this twisted killer. “You know dark magic.”

“One of your wandering acolytes taught me of your chaotic nature. Your cruelty, your lust to control Sanctuary and remake it in your image.” Bowing her head once more, Mercy huffed as she added, “I expected you to take me in as your follower. But you surprised me. These past months you spent acting like a human. I thought it might have been a test. But then I realized... it was your daughter. Linarian convinced you to coddle the mortal beings of this world.

“You... You have no-”

“You lost your touch!” Mercy snarled, her eyes aflame in the darkened room. “Mankind is but cattle to demons like you. Like Lucia. You piddle around, raising them like children, like your bleeding-heart daughter, when you could destroy them under your hooves.” Mercy held her gaze for a moment, her anger fading to a smoldering smirk. “Linarian is not the child you deserve to have... but I could be.”

Lilith could hardly resist, the silver-tongued killer spinning such intriguing words. It might have been truthful, that the Daughter of Hatred had truly changed. That she had trampled upon her demonic heritage. All in an attempt to mend her relationship with her daughter. And as the pounding ache filled her head, Lilith shuddered as she also felt the growing, gnawing hunger seep into her gut. That lust for human meat had never fully left. It was simply buried deep down inside, supplanted by Lilith’s burgeoning hope for a reunited relationship with her daughter.

“You are offering me...” Lilith paused, her stomach roiling as she thought of what this might mean. “A new family?”

“The bloodline of Mephisto is obviously tainted,” Mercy scowled. “You are the true heir to Sanctuary. You just need your own... Corrupting influence.”

“You, my dear,” Lilith growled, her hand instinctively resting upon her stomach as her gaze fell upon the captive woman. “And what would you receive in return? I know this little arrangement,” she trailed off momentarily, before correcting herself. “Adoption, would not come without its costs.”

“A family that doesn’t treat me like some hippie love child,” Mercy muttered, before narrowing her eyes. “You would get a daughter who truly savored your work, your lust to destroy. Human as I may be, I would wholeheartedly bathe in your blood and blessing, to show the depth of my devotion.” A warm smirk crawled across Mercy’s face as she added, “In a sense I already have.”

Lilith shivered as she remembered that frigid day. How in her sudden panic, Mercy had clawed the length of her arm. Flipping her hand over, the Daughter of Hatred could see the thin marks scratched into her forearm, nearly healed by now. When her eyes raised once again to Mercy, the young girl was licking her fingers, almost instinctual in her lust to anoint herself and her devotion. The growing

crescendo of hunger and lust continued to swell about Lady Lilith's body until at long last, something finally clicked. Stepping forwards towards Mercy, Lilith motioned for her to kneel, eyes flitting up to the terrified woman bound upon the wooden support beam.

"I accept your sacrifice, and your lust to become more than my servant," Lilith spoke in a low, calm voice. It was different from the booming calls she gave when presiding over the Cult of the Triune. This was personal. Deeply personal. Lowering her claws to her previously scarred wrist, Lilith slowly dragged them upwards, re-opening the scratch marks that Mercy had given her. Warm, demonic blood, almost prismatic in how it shimmered, began to drool down her forearm, the first drops welling at her fingertips before dropping to the floor below. "Drink deep, my dear, and accept your place as my daughter... We have much to celebrate." Before she had even finished, Mercy had latched on to Lady Lilith's arm, her tongue slowly lapping along the fissures as she sucked down her new mother's blood with unquestioning devotion. Lilith could sense it, coursing through her body with abandon, the demonic corruption taking hold. All the while, that growing throb in her head almost reached an explosive, unceasing pounding as the pair communed; a silent connection between the two that would always remain, and would always remind them of their shared drive.

Lifting her blood-soaked arm, Lilith gently caressed Mercy's face, her soft, unassuming features almost radiant with the gift bestowed upon her. It seemed almost right, though perhaps she already had more Nephalem lineage than she let on. "Th- Thank you, Mother," Mercy said in soft, halting gasps, still finding the coppery taste in her mouth a new and orgasmic sensation as the demonic blood sealed her fate.

"Welcome to the family of Mephisto," Lilith growled, before turning her attention towards the bound woman. "I most certainly appreciate the gift you brought me."

"How long has it been?" Mercy asked with a smirk, reluctantly releasing Lilith's body from her grip, as one might nervously put down a set of prayer beads at the end of their use.

"Months," Lilith muttered, reaching out to caress the terrified young woman. Despite not recognizing her, Lilith was pleased with Mercy's choice in women. A little plump about the midsection, cute curves in her midriff and hip, the only modesty afforded being a sheer fabric slip tucked around her waist. The sort of depraved modesty one might expect to see at an execution, a mockery at best. "But I feel that tonight should be more of a celebration, don't you think?" Reaching up, Lady Lilith teased a clawed finger against the young lady's slender neck, dribbles of blood painting soft streaks of crimson down her body as she writhed against the makeshift garrote.

Slipping her fingers against the rope tied about the lady's neck, Lilith began to tighten her grip, the hempen necklace causing her sacrifice to tilt her head back in a vain attempt to gulp down a final breath of air. It would do her no good. Twisting her hand, Lilith slowly knotted the rope until it conformed in a snug grip, forcing her victim's head flush with the wooden post while dimpling into the flesh of her throat. Even gagged, Lilith and Mercy could define the moment when her cries turned from whimpering pleas to gagging and choking gulps as the noose cut off her breath. Lilith could feel a cold shiver rush through her body as she put her weight into the rope, cinching off the girl's windpipe without putting too much pressure on her throat. After all, she wanted to suffocate her, not to break her neck as one might in a long drop.

Mercy remained upon the ground, staring up at the naked woman with growing excitement. She seemed to bathe in this religious experience, the Daughter of Hatred personally snuffing out the life of the sweet lady she kidnapped as a sacrifice. There had been no sacrifices in the Cathedral since Linarian imposed her ultimatum, save that of the occasional angelic creature that strayed too far from safety. And here, in a humble, abandoned building, she was about to rekindle the tortures that fueled Lady Lilith's rise to power in the City of New Tristram. Mercy bathed in the sight of the girl's pathetic struggles; he reveled as the rope noose tightened about the girl's throat, a gentle tint of purplish blue filling her cheeks and tainting her lips. It helped that the Daughter of Hatred was well acquainted with all methods of torture and brutality. Every now and then she would let off just enough slack for a hissing wheeze to escape the suffocating lady's nose, a single half-breath filling her burning lungs before clenching off once more. Lilith took great lust in ensuring that her victim could do nothing but jerk and spasm wildly in place, chest puffed out in a frantic plea for air, exposing her pert breasts.

It was... erotic. Intoxicating. Mercy could not help but dip her hands down between her legs, slowly slipping two fingers to her slick folds. The sight of her adopted disciple's fervor only bid Lilith to act with more ferocity; keeping the rope taut, she began to carve deep, claw-like gashes with her opposite hand, cleaving the girl's exposed flesh and inscribing words and symbols directly into her flesh. Sigils that burned with magical electricity. Deep, bloody gashes that gnarled through her supple skin. Marks of the Triune slashed into her right breast and upon her thigh, ensuring that even if she lived, she would always be marked as a whore of the demons. But Lilith and Mercy both knew she would never receive that chance.

After fighting Lilith's embrace for what felt like ages... eons... the young lady finally gave in. Her vision turned spotty and dark as pent-up blood pounded in her head. Only as her head slumped to the side, her body held upright by the iron brace about her throat, did Lilith slowly ease off the rope that cinched tight around her throat. For a brief moment, the relapsed penitent wondered if she had been too rough on the girl, glancing nervously over to her corruptor as the pair watched with bated breath. Then they saw it, her chest slowly rose, nostrils splayed as the first unimpeded breath entered her body. There would be no desperate gasp, no showy thrashing as her unconscious mind shot back to reality. Instead, the blackness would only fade away, first to grey, then to spotty visuals as she came back. Awakening once more to the nightmare she was forced to endure, the young lady felt a tingle on her chin as she was forced to look Lady Lilith in the eyes, her new acolyte standing just off to her side.

"My, my, dear... You seem quite pale..." Lilith crooned softly, scoffing at the way her chest heaved and fell, sucking in the dank and fetid air from the old root cellar. "Don't worry, you've served half of your punishment."

"Punishment for daring to defy the will of the Daughter of Hatred, by simply living your fetid, mortal life," Mercy interrupted, practically spitting the words.

"It would be... improper... for a woman of your beauty to suffer the indignity of having your body exposed for all to see as you suffered and died for my pleasure." Lilith slowly lowered her hand, tracing a finger or two down her captive's form, teasing each bloody cut as if trying to cause them just a bit more damage with her claws. "That is why, for modesty's sake, women of your stature are sentenced to be strangled and burnt to death." Even with the blood pounding in her ears, the captive woman managed to let out a low, listless cry, shaking her head as she pleaded for some respite. "It is of no consequence to me should you survive the strangulation."

As tears streaked her face, dripping down into the open wounds that covered her body, the tortured girl found herself staring down at her own legs as Lady Lilith teased the edge of her simple fabric slip with her fingertips. At first, it looked as if she was threatening to pull back that last vestige of modesty, tugging it away to reveal the sweet young lady's tender snatch. But instead, she felt a growing warmth erupt upon the edge of the covering. A gout of flame erupted from Lilith's palm, the curling wisps of fire catching upon the simple cloth covering. A noxious black smoke rose to meet her drippy nose, the scent of burning cloth and pubic hair causing her to choke and cough as Lilith and Mercy stepped back to watch their handiwork. As the fire ate away the sheer fabric, curling the edges as acid smoke filled the air, the captive lady's most private parts became more and more visible with each passing second, her supple lips framed by smoldering embers as the neatly trimmed bush burned away in silky wisps. The pain upon her groin faded fast, but the burning fabric had much more surface area to cover as it flared over her thighs.

Quickly nibbling away the fabric between her legs, the smoldering wick of cloth soon brought the fire into contact with both of her legs. Unable to bear the painful burn, the woman jerked with frantic desperation, hoping to simply escape the growing heat all about her reddened and scorched legs. She completely forgot about the show that Mercy made, piling seasoned wood about her legs and anointing it with oil.

The flaming cloth fluttered off either side of her thighs, landing in a gentle pile about her tightly bound feet. The world seemed to hang for a heartbeat, then two as Lilith watched the slip sputter, much of the fire extinguished to curling embers, the fall causing most of the tenuous fire to extinguish. But a small, bunched up section to the right of her foot began to smoke, the flame growing once more as it caught on the gnarled and tangled edges of the fabric. The heat sucked some of the slick and glistening oils out of the wood below, pulling it into the fabric. Acting like a wick, the little cloth slip soon became a growing inferno, the heat beginning to sizzle and pop as the first bundles of kindling caught below.

Panicked desperation rang out from the sacrifice's mouth, her gagged moans taking on a dark desperation as she twisted this way and that upon the wooden stool. One log became two, then four, quickly spreading with the aid of the oil until the young lady found herself wreathed with flame, the ceiling of the root cellar quickly filling with sooty black smoke as the oily flame spread. It was only now that Lilith urged her young acolyte to step back towards the entryway, knowing that despite her demonic powers, she could still be harmed by the fire.

Yet she stayed a little longer, watching the way the twisting fire curled up the lady's lithe thighs. Seared meat began to hiss and spatter, blistering and charring as the fire licked up her legs. Soon even the stool she sat on was alight, the edges blaring with charring as the roiling heat brought hot air blasting up and over her face and head. Lilith moaned as she watched the way her victim frantically struggled against the iron neck brace, hoping against hope that she might choke herself out on the searing hot metal, or dash her own brains out upon the sizzling hot wooden beam to spare herself the torture. The tight fit gave her little leverage to do so. In the end, it would not matter. As the roiling inferno climbed up chest high, she not only breathed in hot embers with each breath, but also could no longer take a breath that did not come with a terrible gout of flame upon her charring face and nose. It was a cold consolation that amidst the roaring inferno, Mercy's sacrifice to the Daughter of Hatred met her end with scarred lungs, swollen and filled with fluid as she finally came to her end.

The fire that ended her life would quickly spread to the dilapidated, one-room building above, willing away the rotting support beams and shattering stonework until the whole structure collapsed in upon itself, only burning out before sunrise. There would be no investigation, Lilith made sure of that. But that morning, Linarian awoke to feel something terrible had happened in the balance of nature. Like someone had taken the scales that weighed all of Sanctuary and thrown them clean off the table. Dragging herself out from bed, she stumbled in confusion, wracked with a far worse pain than she'd seen when Mercy first made herself known. Early in the morning, only Lady Lucia was up, kneading dough for her morning patrons.

"Linarian, hun," she gasped, the lithe young succubus watching her niece nearly tumble down the staircase. "What's wrong? Is everything okay?"

Catching herself on a chair back, Linarian shuddered as she looked into her aunt's eyes. She could not place it, but something dark, something cruel seemed to be growing beneath Lady Lucia, like a groundswell of evil waiting to swallow her up. She was still innocent, but there would be no saving her. "I- I have to..." Linarian swallowed, the words catching in her throat. "I have to leave. Immediately." Pushing off the chair back, the young noblewoman did not care that she knocked it over as she rushed towards the door, leaving behind her personal effects in the upstairs bedroom. "I- I will write to you soon, Auntie. Something terrible has happened..." A chill struck her body as she could almost sense the form that the calamity took when she closed her eyes. A tall, familiar demoness, and a young lady with eyes like knives. She dare not say it, but the world was about to descend into chaos. "I need to plan how best to... to deal with this new threat to Sanctuary.